

# **Statements of Administration**

## **BIRTHDAYS**

**December 19, 1975**

**WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD**

This statement of administration is the result of careful research by the Doctrinal Team, with input from the field ministry and general membership, and has been approved by the Pastor General and/or the Executive Vice-President.

### May Christians Celebrate Birthdays?

Many of you have asked for a printed explanation of our current understanding on the question of birthday celebrations. Certainly the matter of birthday celebrations is not the most important "doctrinal" question. But this clarification in print is now necessary. As you already know, the Church has never taught that Christians ought not observe their date of birth. Unless we all did so, we would not even know our age. Each of us has taken note of (observed) the fact that we are one year older on a given calendar date.

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The Bible itself keeps careful track of the ages of the patriarchs and of the exact number of years the kings of Israel and Judah reigned. Almost any application form requires an exact knowledge of one's birthdate.

The Church of God has traditionally discouraged the practice of birthday celebrations. A celebration complete with the candles, the cake and all the other accoutrements is quite different, of course, from a simple observance.

### The Biblical Evidence

Our teaching has been based primarily on a few biblical examples. We know, for instance, that the chief baker lost his life on the occasion of Pharaoh's birthday (Gen. 40). The decapitation of John the Baptist also occurred during the celebration of a birthday of a secular ruler -- Herod Agrippa II (Matt. 14:6-10).

Additionally, we have the example of a probable birthday celebration in the Book of Job. Notice verse 4 of chapter 1: "His [Job's] sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each on his day . . . ." This same Hebrew expression translated "His day," is equated with Job's birthday in chapter three. "After this Job opened his mouth, and cursed the day of his birth [Hebrew: his day] . . . . Let the day perish wherein I was born . . ." (Job 3:1,3).

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Job said in connection with his son's festivities described in chapter one: ". . . It may be that my sons have sinned . . ." (verse 5). Apparently the celebration itself was not considered sinful, but the drunkenness, promiscuity, or other immoral events that may possibly have taken place on the occasion were. Job's offering to God was in the form of a "just in case" insurance policy (see verse 5).

But aside from these two specific examples, a possible third, and an oblique reference in Ecclesiastes 7:1 about the day of death being better than one's birth, the Bible is otherwise silent on the matter. (We have to realize that the Bible is not an ultimate Talmud designed to specifically regulate every little nuance and vagary of human behavior. Church members have to learn to make sound and proper judgments based on the mind of God as revealed in the whole of the Bible -- see I Corinthians 6:2.)

### Conclusions from Other Scriptures

The exact date of Jesus Christ's own birth is simply not revealed. God evidently did not want Jesus' birthday celebrated, as he knew the pagans were accustomed to do. However, on the other side of the question, the birth of Christ does occupy a fairly important segment of scripture -- several long chapters (esp. in the book of Luke) are devoted to the manner of and circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. It would be very erroneous to even imply that there was anything evil or sinful about the birthdate of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It was a wonderful blessing for all mankind. But God ordained that the date of his death be observed -- not the date of his birth (ICor. 11:24-26; John 13:14-17).

Thus we can see the Bible does not give us a clear-cut "Thus saith the Lord," on the question of birthdays. Sometimes God expects us to exercise a degree of judgment and common sense in dealing with differing circumstances -- based, of course, on biblical principles.

The fact that unfortunate events took place on two (or three?) birthday celebrations, as recorded in the Bible does not of itself tell us that such celebrations are wrong. The apostle Paul showed

that even the sacred observance of the Passover was subject to abuse (I Cor. 11). Some few members were actually getting drunk at this vital annual occasion. This does not, of course, prove that the Passover observance is wrong; neither does it prove that the partaking of alcoholic beverages (in moderation) is wrong (Of course, there is positive instruction from the scriptures that we should definitely observe the Passover; not so with birthdays).

The fact remains that there is no command in either Testament against the observance or celebration of birthdays. The examples provided, however, should warn us that abuse on any such occasion is possible.

God's principle is moderation and balance in all things -- meaning all things that are right and good (Phil. 4:5). Like any party, a birthday celebration can become an occasion for drunkenness and or other moral infractions that should be strictly avoided.

Let's get down to some specifics. Should members' children go to birthday parties?: That depends on the circumstances and obviously requires the use of judgment on the parent's part. If the schoolteacher organizes a party on the birthday of a child, or the mother down the street does, there would be no prohibition of a member's child attending -- if not attending would cause acute personal embarrassment to that child, a lot of neighborhood furor, social pressure and even religious persecution. Such a birthday celebration is intended to honor a child. A too-narrow, reactionary stance on questions like these has often brought us needless persecution.

Another instance: Suppose the social situation demands that you honor your boss on the occasion of his birthday. And suppose the office staff is planning a party for him, with each worker chipping in a little money for a nice present. After all, he is your boss and pays your salary; he deserves some honor from you on such an occasion -- "honor to whom honor; custom to whom custom" is the principle (Rom. 13). In such a situation, attending an office party or one at the boss' home, is permissible. This particular situation wouldn't come up but once a year, if at all.

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Let's bring it down to an even more personal level in the Church.

Should members have birthday parties for themselves, their children or other members?: We would not advise it! Why should we make an annual selfishly oriented ego-trip of someone's birthday by holding a big celebration and virtually "commanding" everyone in the Church neighborhood to be there with a gift at such-and-such a time and place. In a church as large as ours, every day of the year is someone's birthday. We could theoretically exhaust all of our financial resources buying presents for each other -- especially if we printed all the members' birthdates in the WN.

What about wishing someone "happy birthday"?: Of course, we wish that every day could be happy for everyone, but that particular sentiment is not wrong or sinful of itself.

What about gifts?: If it is necessary to go to a birthday party on a rare occasion, it would not be right to go into the presence of whomever is being honored without some sort of a gift. You wouldn't go into the presence of a king without a gift (Rom. 13). However, it is better to highlight the Feast of Tabernacles by giving gifts at that time of the year when the emphasis is not so incoming and toward the self. But the giving of a gift -- on any occasion -- is a morally neutral act. It is not inherently or intrinsically sinful.

### Important Scriptural Principles

If a member should go ahead and have a big birthday party, there is no scripture that says he has committed a great sin!

Now notice some important scriptures that bear on this subject in principle. Romans 14:1-3: As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything [edible], while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him."

Read this very vital and important principle in verse 5: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand." If a brother in the Church should decide to have some kind of a birthday celebration, the rest of us shouldn't judge or condemn him for it. His relationship to God is a vertical one -- not a lateral one filtered through the rest of the membership!

Verse 17: "For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." This is a key passage in the Bible that we all ought to mark and never forget. The Kingdom of God is not of the physical matters that we tend to enlarge into a mountainous problem. The Kingdom of God is not a huge birthday cake. A birthday cake doesn't hurt anybody, or help anybody, as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned.

Concluding with verses 12, 13, and 19: "So each of us shall give account of himself to God. Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother . . . Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

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